CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 37 *CutBank 37*

Article 20

Winter 1992

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The doctors said my mother died of kidney failure, but I know what really killed her. She started dying a year ago, when my father's heart stopped and he fell dead in the snow trying to carry a sling of logs from the bin in the back yard. After he died my mother didn't touch anything of his: not his tools in the basement, color-coded and arranged with an artist's attention to size and function; not the bottles of blood pressure pills on the rotating tray in the kitchen. She stopped using the car then, taking her warped and rust-covered Schwinn to the corner store or paying the young boys who skateboarded by the house to run errands. She told me she was afraid to drive alone. When she called, every odd day at six-fifteen, she would talk about Dad in the present tense, as though he were standing there about to come to the phone. It was eerie in a way I had no control over, a device my mother used to endure what time was left in the cycle she once told me life is.

Over the next several months I worried she might live on forever in that distracted state, stuck in a place and time she couldn't bear to let go. But then the call came from the neighbor, Mrs. Tackett, to tell us she found my mother slumped on the kitchen floor when she was supposed to be at a potluck. "Sixty-three is so young," Mrs. Tackett kept saying. "Sixty-three. Your mother was some spring chicken."

It sounds corny in light of the folder full of medical data the hospital kept on her, but sometimes they miss the obvious. Those little bean-shaped filters were only one of many lesser failures doctors and such like-minded folk attribute my mother's death to.

They don't have the instruments to detect the real cause, namely, the evaporation of will from her brain and the longing manufactured in her overworked heart.

My son, Korey, and I got here yesterday. There is no truth to the claim my ex-wife, Lynne, has made about us: that I am a criminal and Korey a kidnappee. When I came to get him I told her I needed Korey with me to help "get things together," that it may be his last chance ever to see the house, or the things my parents put in it. Lynne was irked by this. She had all sorts of words, including abduction and piracy. She tried to prevent Korey from coming here by threatening to talk to her lawyer, and then to certain friends in jobs that mattered, corporate types and people with stock. It was too soon after the funeral to drive him all the way back there, she said. She is convinced the trip will threaten his emotional stability, but I think she is really bothered by him spending another four hours in the car with me.

The hardware store I help manage has given me indefinite leave. They understand these things, how, sometimes, cleaning up takes longer than expected. Since Korey and I arrived I have done my best to stay busy. Yesterday, I spent the afternoon at the kitchen table making up lists and jotting reminders to myself. This morning I was out at seven cutting the grass, dew and all, sweeping the clumps from the sidewalk. It was an auspicious beginning, but since then I have dusted my mother's bureau three times, polished the clocks on the mantle twice, and basically done nothing more than those preliminary tasks children of the deceased are apt to do, most of which has been to wander from room to room and stare.

Upstairs, in the space that decades ago was our attic, Korey is playing pachinko. His weight rocks on the floorboards and his laughter washes down the stairway into the kitchen. He likes the game, but he knows nothing of its history. Korey doesn't realize that the pachinko machine came all the way from Seoul where it is played in gambling parlors as obsessively as love and money are hoarded. He doesn't know that I brought it back after navigating a Douglas C-130 transport around Vietnam, how the pachinko machine was a gift for my parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary; a gift and a kind of apology for missing it by two months. I haven't told him that I slipped the game past customs wrapped in a parachute to avoid the surcharge, or any of the deeper secrets, like how, the first time I played the game, I was so wired on hashish I sometimes saw elephants the size of house cats walking around the room.

In the years we were together, Lynne was as passionate about avoiding pachinko as others were about getting their turn. She cautioned me repeatedly about its influence on people, about how we would play all open-mouthed and bleary-eyed. She made claims about its dubious nature; called the machine wily and disruptive. She went on to say that, like the domestic slot machines and pinball games it is related to, it is associated with such evils as greed and avarice and an interest in one's self. When Korey was born, she made a public declaration that the game was off-limits to him. She seemed to think he needed to be protected from it, separated, as if it were an ornery dog or a busy street. For some reason the game spooked her. Maybe she thought it would suddenly, unpredictably, shoot an electric current up our arms and into our brains. Or maybe she worried it might speak in tongues or that devilish images were hidden in the patterns on the

front. She never said. And through it all, I never had the courage to ask.

I see in the paper they're calling this an Estate Sale, which makes me laugh because the house is pretty small, and there isn't much furniture or impressive landscaping. Its virtues are two huge trees, one oak, one elm, out front, and a moderate-sized eucalyptus in back. And there is also the half-acre lot it sits on outside of Cincinnati, part of a time-ripened neighborhood with the kind of weathered, shadowy aesthetic people will pay good money for. But really, it's not much more than a postage stamp of land, a well-insulated box of a house, and a few rooms filled with the kind of curios and doodads that accumulate when people stay in the same place for so long.

Nothing has been moved since my mother went to the hospital. It's as though my parents have driven down to Scottsdale or Tucson like they always talked about. I try to think of the house as deserted, but that doesn't work. The clocks my mother collected chime on the hour and a familiar smell is here—part tobacco, part Vitabath—as strong as any memory. Worse, there is still food in the refrigerator. I keep filling glasses of milk and only drinking half, as if out of fear that it could spoil at any moment. I try to rationalize, but it only makes me feel bloated and guilty.

On the tin doors of the pantry there is a flock of abandoned sewing spool magnets. My mother used to make them, several each year, to mascot holidays and family homecomings. Some resemble cylindrical mice, others tubular kittens, and one, I think, is supposed to be a dachshund. They stare at me with their tiny plastic bubble eyes, with pupils made from coriander seeds.

When I walk through the kitchen they follow my steps as if demanding an explanation, as if I should know what's going to happen to them now. I've tried running past, but their eyes are stuck like people in paintings or photographs. You can't shake the gaze.

In between the clock chimes and the noise Korey makes upstairs the silence is enormous, stellar even. It's as though I can hear things known only in theory, quasars popping and the spin of positrons. I am comforted when the larger sounds return: the lever at the bottom of the machine cocking and flinging those steel marbles up into the game's faceboard, Korey's squeaks of delight, his sighs. There is only one shot which wins in pachinko, one small latch the marble must hit to release the jackpot. Perhaps because we can cheat it by reaching behind and retrieving the marbles it takes from us, our game seems easier to play than the ones found in casinos, but this is a deception. It is as frustrating as anything we can pitch ourselves against, including golf and the math used in quantum mechanics.

My father had a theory about pachinko, one he shared with me during a visit Lynne and I made years ago. He believed it was fortitude and not chance or lunar alignment which won the game; that the mind, on some plane too thin and far out of reach for most of us to notice, made a finite number of calculations involving weight and friction and the way our fingers bend. He told me a formula containing angles of trajectory, ball velocity, and barometric pressure. It was time, he went on, time which distracted us from winning, which kept us from truly examining the nature of the game. I was lost, I confessed, but curious and I told him so. I wanted to know if it worked. He looked away then, studying the floor or something deeper. "Not yet," he said.

Later, when Lynne and I were trying to save ourselves by having a baby, the game got moved upstairs where it sat forgotten and dormant for years, as much an overlooked part of the house as any doorjamb or electrical outlet. To my knowledge, my father never did find the right shot. In his years of playing, he never won the game a single time. Nor, during all the visits that followed, did he ever discuss it again except once, while Lynne and I were there showing off our new son. Dad and I were alone in the family room, half-watching the Bengals getting routed by Miami. At half time I asked if he ever played pachinko anymore. No, he said, he had stopped cold turkey. He had just finished rolling a cigarette and for a moment, in the matchlight, his face went soft and entirely ageless, as easily mine or Korey's as his own. "It was doing something strange," he told me, and, in the last breath he spent on the game, he said he had stopped thinking of ways to play and began to think only of winning, a condition he likened to a virus, or consumption, a force which feeds on itself.

If Lynne knew I was keeping the pachinko machine, or why, I feel confident she would find some way to have charges brought up. She would claim it represents the same types of obsessions and vices that stir around in my head. Children, she has told me, should live tempered lives. Too much involvement is unsettling, even dangerous. And she may very well be right. She could point to my mother as an example, who, childlike at the end, was destroyed by her want. Or, she could say, as she has been known to do, that Korey is in line to inherit the compulsiveness my father was subject to—that force which turned the attic into my bedroom in less than a week, and, as he vaulted past his fiftieth birth-

day, caused his blood vessels to swell and strain and require medication to keep from bursting.

Once, I asked her point-blank if she was ashamed that my father was never anything more than a park maintenance supervisor, or if it embarrassed her that my mother rented putters at the park's miniature golf course so she could be near him during the day. Lynne wanted to know what kind of questions those were supposed to be. Some years later, during the last tumultuous weeks of our marriage, the topic came around again. I asked if she believed in a connection between the life my parents led and what she once called my hapless and insufficient style of managing things: the hardware store, the money we would spend, our family. She was quiet for a while, then started in. Yes, she said. Yes to this and yes to that. And the rest came out in such a rush that I couldn't help but imagine her head as a balloon full of grievances, her mouth a nozzle suddenly untied. She told me, in the way that she has, with her upper lip arched the way some people can raise an eyebrow, about the relationship with our dentist she was in the midst of. She talked about love: where she found it, and where she did not. I learned how secure our dentist was and how much he could offer our son, what opportunities would be afforded and where Korey could get his schooling. All the while I was trying to picture the man who had crowned two of my teeth and replaced one, the man who had been inside both of us, and what his hands looked like against her skin. I wanted to tell her how his Jaguar was likely to threaten Korey's emotional stability, but I never did and now fear it may follow me, unsaid, into oblivion.

Korey has come to get me. He stops in the kitchen doorway, jeans furled at his sneakers, hands on hips, and tells me with a thin reed of impatience touching his voice that one of the pachinko marbles is stuck. Standing there, he looks like a shrunken man. The way the light hits him, it swallows up his boyish softness and leaves behind the gaunt, skeletal shadows of adulthood.

"Dad," he says, "c'mon."

So I do. I sweep him up and play sack of potatoes over my shoulder but he isn't laughing. He insists we go upstairs.

The marble has stuck on the uppermost pin, trapped in the small space between the glass and the mosaic of pins and baffles and ornamental buttons on the faceboard. It doesn't take much to get it going again, a rap on the top of the machine and the marble is dislodged; Korey could have done it himself if he were a little taller. Sitting Indian style, I am his height, and together we watch the marble bounce and ricochet down through the patterns. At first, it starts out too far right, but it strikes another pin which sends it hopping back to the left.

"Oooo," we say. "Oh!"

It could work, I think. This could be the one. The marble plunks down another few steps, sets a small aluminum flower spinning. Korey's fists are clenched into oversize golf balls, and he's crouching now, as if that might help. The marble rebounds again, traveling floorward. It skips once, dances, then shimmies to a pause as it settles between two pins. Korey sucks in a breath and holds it.

Like so many times before, like always it seems, the marble squirts between the the two pins, roles left off another directly below and misses the latch holding all the other marbles in their cup. Korey throws up his hands and topples back into my lap.

He's grinning now, showing me all of his tiny teeth. I think that he is lucky to have gotten Lynne's looks; it will help him someday.

"Rats," he says to me.

"Close," I say.

"Why doesn't Mom want me to play?"

"She thinks it's bad for you. Like television, and candy."

"Is it?"

"I don't think so," I reply. But when he's quiet I remember what my father said about the game, how it finally affected him.

Korey's mouth stretches into a yawn and he settles a little more deeply into my lap.

"Are we going to sell it?" he asks.

"Not a chance."

"Will I be able to keep playing?"

"You can play any time you come over."

"Good," he says.

Downstairs, in the kitchen where I was sitting, is the stack of lists I have spent the day writing and revising. I think of them, with their cryptic doodles and abstract borders, with their catalogues and columns of furniture and appliances and craft supplies, and I feel the enormity of the task we are here to do press against our space. It strikes me how quickly the first five years of Korey's life have passed, how one day he won't be able to remember my parents without pictures. Soon, the halls have to be swept and the fireplace shoveled out. I have to pack the tools and clean windows. Final decisions have to be made: what should be sold and what kept, what can be given to neighbors and charity, and what should be thrown away.

Korey reaches over and places another chrome ball on the firing arm. He shoots it up to the top of the game and this one starts its way down on its own. It moves right and keeps going that way until it finally hits the side and drops to the bottom, the equivalent of bowling's gutter ball. Korey sighs and sits back in my lap.

"Do you think I'll ever win?"

"Well," I begin. "Um."

"Um?" Korey says. He's squinting at me, scrunching up his nose.

"Right."

"What does 'um' mean?"

"It means I don't know. Maybe."

"Oh," he says frowning, and curls closer for warmth.

I hold him, his body all lightness and bend, and I think of Lynne with her dentist. I think of my mother assembling her magnets and the fury my father displayed when he hammered nails. They all seem to be just outside the room, orbiting past our window and staring in with the hundred different faces they could, at times, share: dismay and bewilderment, pride and loathing, joy and its companion, loss.

Korey yawns again and I feel his exhaustion in my own skin, worming its way down to the center of me. In the back of the house, tiny and far away, my mother's clocks start to chime.

"Here," I say, reaching around behind the game and scooping the cool steel marbles. "Let's try again."